

Chapter One

I felt alive.

The alternating flashes of dark and soft lights, the throbbing pulse from an Ellie Goulding club mix, the movement of sweaty bodies dancing, grinding, enjoying each other – the Sky Launch Nightclub got into my blood and turned me on in a way that I hadn't let anyone or anything else do in quite some time. When I was there – working the bar, assisting the wait staff, attending to the DJs – I felt more free than at any other time of my day. The club held magic.

And, for me, healing.

For all its vibrancy and life, the club was a safe haven for me. It was a place I could attach myself without worry of going overboard. No one was going to sue me for focusing too hard or long on my job. Or, at least, it was unlikely. But rumor was The Sky Launch, which had been up for sell for quite some time, was about to be sold. A new owner could change everything.

"Laynie." Sasha, the waitress working the upper floor pulled me from my thoughts and back to my job. "I need a Vodka Tonic, White Russian, and two Butterballs."

"Got it." I pulled the Vodka from the shelf behind me.

"I can't believe how busy we are for a Thursday," she said as I worked on her order.

"It's the summer crowd. Give it a week and the place will explode." I couldn't wait. Summer at the club was a total blast.

"That's when things around here get fun." David Lindt, the club manager joined our conversation, a sparkle showing in his eyes as the bright white light that lit up the bar illuminated his face.

"Real fun." I gave David a wide smile and winked while I placed the drinks on Sasha's tray, my stomach tensing with a flicker of desire.

He answered my wink with one of his own, stirring the flicker in my belly to a low flame.

David wasn't the love of my life – not even the love of the moment – but his shared passion for the club sparked something in me. My interest in learning more and moving up from bartending had seemed to interest him as well. More than one late night of showing me the ropes had ended in heavy make-out sessions. Though I hadn't been instantly attracted to him, his small stature, curly blonde hair and blue eyes had grown on me. Also, his keen business sense and exceptional management style were qualities I required in a man. And, truthfully, the lack of effect he had on my emotions provided half the draw. We had decent chemistry, but he didn't have me freaking out all over him like I had over other guys. He was safe and solid and that was my definition of the perfect man.

I rang up Sasha's order while David filled shot glasses – Todd's order, I suspected, another waiter standing next to Sasha. David rarely stepped behind the bar anymore, but we were short-staffed for the night and I welcomed his help. Especially with the way we were picking up. A regular and his friends had just leaned against the bar waiting for my attention, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw a suit taking a spot at the far end of the counter.

I handed Sasha her ticket, but David stopped her before she could take off. "Hold on. While there's at least a few of us here, I think we should toast to Laynie." He passed around the shots he'd been filling. Tequila – my liquor of choice.

I peered at him suspiciously. While it wasn't unusual to have a shot or two while working a shift, it was always kept on the down-low, never in front of our manager and certainly not at his encouragement.

"No worries," David said, bumping my shoulder with his. "It's a special occasion."

With a shrug, I smiled and took the shot he offered me. "You're the boss."

"We're too busy for a proper toast, so let's just say this is to Laynie. We're proud of you, girl."

I blushed and clinked glasses as everyone around, including the regular customer and his friends, shouted out "here, here" and "cheers".

“Woo hoo!” I screamed my own excitement. I’d worked hard to get my degree. I was proud of myself, too. With my friends, I slammed the shot back, enjoying the burn as it lined my throat and spread through my veins. “Goddamn, that’s nice!”

Aware that the crowd was getting antsy, Sasha took off with her order while David filled Todd’s. I turned my attention first to the regular, a guy whose name deserted me. He leaned in to give me a hug which I returned. I might not remember him, but I knew how to earn my tips.

“Four of whatever’s on tap,” he said, raising his voice over the music which seemed to have gotten louder in the last few minutes. “Where’s Liesl?”

I handed him his first two mugs and began work on the next two. “Since she’s covering all my shifts next week she has tonight off.” That’s right – this was the guy that usually flirted with Liesl, another bartender.

“That’s cool. So what are you doing on your vacation?” With Liesl not around, Regular turned his charm on me. His eyes travelled to my breasts that were admittedly hard to miss. Especially with my low cut neckline. I had some nice girls, who could blame me for showing them off?

“Absolutely nothing.” I hoped my delivery sounded like I was looking forward to my vacation. Truth was I’d taken the time off so I could go home and spend time with my older brother. But just that morning, Brian had called the trip off, saying that he was too swamped with work. He wouldn’t even be able to make it to my graduation.

I swallowed the emotions that threatened to show on my face. On top of being disappointed, I was terrified. Me with nothing to occupy my time was not an attractive me. I’d almost told David several times to go ahead and put me on the schedule, but every time I started, I felt like a total loser. Maybe a week off would be good for me. I could handle it. Right?

Now wasn’t the time to fret about the week to come. I finished the transaction with Regular and slid down to take care of the suit at the end of the counter.

I let the pulse of the music propel me toward the customer at the end of the bar. “Now what can I get...you...?” My words trailed off as my eyes met the suit’s, the air leaving my lungs, suddenly sucked out by the sight that met me. The man...he was...*gorgeous*.

Incredibly gorgeous.

I couldn’t look away, his appearance magnetizing. Which meant he was exactly the type of man I should avoid.

After the numerous heartaches that had dotted my past, I’d discovered that I could divide the men I was attracted to into two categories. The first category could be described as fuck and forget. These were the men that got me going in the bedroom, but were easy to leave behind if necessary. It was the only group I bothered with anymore. They were the safe ones. David fell into this category.

Then there were the men that attracted me that were anything but safe. They weren’t fuck and forget – they were, “Oh, fuck!” They drew me to them so intensely that I became consumed by them, absolutely focused on everything they did, said and were. I ran from these men, far and fast.

Two seconds after locking eyes with this man, I knew I should be running.

He seemed familiar – he must have been in the club before. But if he had been, I couldn’t imagine that I’d have forgotten. He was the most breathtaking man on the planet – his chiseled cheekbones and strong jaw sat beneath perfectly floppy brown hair and the most intense gray eyes I’d ever seen. His five o’clock shadow made my skin itch, yearning to feel the burn of it against my face – against my inner thighs. From what I could see, his expensive three-piece navy suit was fitted and of excellent taste. And his smell – a distinct fragrance of unscented soap and aftershave and pure male goodness – nearly had me sniffing at the air in front of him like a dog in heat.

But it wasn’t just his incomparable beauty and exquisite display of male sex that had me burning between my legs and searching for the nearest exit. It was how he looked at me, in a way that no man

had ever looked at me, a hungry possessiveness present in his stare as if he not only had undressed me in his mind, but had claimed me to be sated by no one ever again except him.

I wanted him instantly, a prickle of fixation taking root in my belly – an old familiar feeling. But that I desired him didn't matter. The expression on his face said that he would have me whether I wanted it or not, that it was as inevitable as if it had already happened.

It scared the hell out of me. The hairs on my skin stood up as witnesses to my fear.

Or perhaps they rose in delight.

Oh, fuck.

"Single-malt Scotch. Neat, please."

I'd almost forgotten I was supposed to be serving him. And the idea of serving him seemed so sexy, that when he reminded me of my job, I nearly fell over myself to get his drink. "I have a 12-year-old Macallan."

"Fine." It was all he said, but the delivery in his low thick voice had my pulse fluttering.

As I handed him his Scotch, his fingers brushed mine and I shivered. Visibly. His eyebrows rose ever so slightly at my reaction, as if he were pleased.

I jerked my hand back tucking it against the bodice of my sheath dress as if the fabric could erase the warmth that had already traveled from where he'd touched me to the needy core between my legs.

I never brushed fingers with customers – why had I done that?

Because I couldn't *not* touch him. I was so drawn to him, so eager for something I couldn't name that I'd take whatever contact I could get.

Not this again. Not now.

Not ever.

I moved away from him. Far and fast. Well, as far as I could get, curling into the opposite corner of the bar. David could serve the guy if he wanted anything else. I needed to not be anywhere near him.

And then, as if on cue in the bad luck life I led, Sasha returned. "David, that group in Bubble Five is harassing the waitress again."

"On it." He turned to me. "You can handle it for a minute?"

"I so got this." I so didn't have it. Not with Mr. Draw-Laynie-To-Me-Whatever-The-Cost-To-Her-Sanity sitting at the end of the bar.

But my declaration was convincing. David slipped out from behind the counter, leaving me alone with the suit. Even Regular and his friends had joined a group of giggly girls at a nearby table. I scanned the dance floor hoping I could attract customers by glaring at the sea of faces. I needed drink orders. Otherwise, Suit might think I was avoiding him by hiding in my corner, which, of course, I was. But, honestly, the distance between us did nothing to dim the tight ball of desire rolling around in my stomach. It was pointless avoidance.

I sighed and wiped down the counter in front of me, though it didn't seem to need it, just to keep myself occupied. When I braved a glance over at the hottie who had invaded my space, I noticed his Scotch was nearing empty.

I also noticed his eyes pinned on me. His penetrating gaze felt more than just the typical stare of a customer trying to attract the bartender, but knowing I had a tendency to exaggerate the meanings of other people's actions, I dismissed the idea. Summoning my courage, I forced myself over to check on him.

Who am I kidding? No forcing was necessary. I glided to him as if he were pulling me with an invisible rope. "Another?"

"No, I'm good." He handed me a hundred. Of course. I'd been hoping he'd give me a credit card so I could glean his name.

No, no, I was not hoping for that. I did not care for his name. Nor did I notice that his left hand was absent of any ring. Or that he was still watching my every move as I took the cash he'd given me and rung his order into the register.

"Special occasion?" he asked.

I furrowed my brow then remembered he'd seen our toast. "Uh, yeah. My graduation. I walk tomorrow for my MBA."

His face lit up in honest admiration. "Congratulations. Here's to your every success." He raised his drink toward me and downed the final swallow.

"Thank you." I was transfixed on his mouth, his tongue darting out to clean the last drop of liquid off his lips. Y-um.

When he set his glass down, I reached out my hand to give him his change, bracing myself for the thrill of contact that would inevitably happen when he took it from me.

But the contact never came. "Keep it."

"I can't." He'd given me a hundred. For one glass of Scotch. I couldn't take that.

"You can and you will." His commanding tone should have rankled me, but instead it got my juices flowing. "Consider it a graduation gift."

"Okay." His demeanor took away my will to argue. "Thanks." I turned to stuff the money into my tip jar on the back counter, pissed at myself for the effect this stranger had on me.

"Is this also a goodbye party?" His voice called from behind me, drawing me back to face him. "I don't imagine you'll be using your MBA to continue bartending."

Of course that's what a suit would assume. He was probably some business type that shared the opinion of my brother – there were jobs worth having and jobs for other people. Bartending was the latter.

But I loved bartending. More, I loved the club. I'd only started my graduate work because I needed more to do. Something to keep me "occupied" was what Brian had said when he offered to pay for my expenses beyond what my scholarship and financial aid covered.

It was a good decision – the right decision since it essentially stopped my life from spiraling out of control. For the past three years I'd thrown my life into school and the nightclub. Problem was that graduation took most of my preoccupation away. And now bogged down with student loans, I had to figure out how to make ends meet without having to leave the Sky Launch.

But I had a plan. I wanted a promotion. I'd been helping with supervisory duties for the last year, but had been unable to get an official title since managers had to work full-time. Now that school was over, I was available for more hours. David had been grooming me for the position. The only wrinkle in my trajectory could be a new owner. But I wasn't going to worry about that. Yet.

Explaining my intent to strangers was never easy, though. How wise was it to use an MBA from Stern for a career in nightclub management? Probably not wise at all. So I swallowed before answering the suit. "Actually, I'd like to move up here. I love the nightclub scene."

To my surprise, he nodded, his eyes shimmering as he sat forward into the bright white light of the bar. "It makes you alive."

"Exactly." I couldn't keep back my smile. How had he known?

"It shows."

Hot, rich, and in tune with me. He was precisely the kind of man that I could obsess over, and not in the healthy way.

"Laynie!" The shout of the Regular from earlier drew me away from the intense gray eyes of the stranger. "I'm out of here. Wanted to say congrats again and good luck. And, hey, here's my number. Give me a call sometime. I can help you occupy your week off."

“Thanks, uh,” I read the name he’d written on the napkin he’d handed me, “Matt.” I waited until he’d walked away before tossing it in the trash under the counter, catching the suit’s eye as I did so.

“Do you do that with every number you receive?”

I paused. It wasn’t like I hadn’t hooked up with customers before, but never with regulars. That was a rule. I didn’t want to see them again. Too much temptation to go crazy over them.

But I had no interest in having that conversation with the suit. And with his eyes constantly on me, I finally believed that my attraction to him wasn’t one-sided. Not when he’d tipped me so generously. “Are you trying to figure out if I’d throw away your number?”

He laughed. “Maybe.”

His reaction made me smile and made the moisture between my thighs thicken. He was fun to flirt with. Too bad I had to end it. I placed my hands on the counter and leaned toward him so he could hear me better over the music, trying not to delight in the searing look he gave my bosom as I did so. “I wouldn’t throw yours away. I wouldn’t take yours at all.”

His eyes narrowed, but the laughter from earlier still danced in them. “Not your type?”

“Not necessarily.” Pretending I wasn’t attracted to him was futile. He had to be aware of my reaction to him.

“Why then?”

“Because you’re just looking for something temporary. Something fun to play with.” I leaned even closer to deliver my punch line – the one that would deter even the horniest of men. “And I get attached.” I stood back up to my full height so I could take in his reaction. “Now doesn’t that just scare you shitless?”

I’d expected to see panic flash through his face. Instead, I saw a flicker of amusement. “You, Alayna Withers, do anything but scare me.” But despite his words, he stood, buttoning his suit coat as he did. “Congratulations again. Quite an accomplishment.”

I watched him for far too long as he walked away, more crestfallen than I wanted to admit about his abrupt departure.

It took me a good five minutes after he left to realize I'd never given him my name.